



Providing Support for Teacher Leaders

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Teachers are increasingly taking on both formal and informal leadership roles. But to succeed as leaders, teachers need both the support of the principal and ample opportunities for professional development.



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Are you a teacher who is one of the following:

- A mentor or coach to new teachers?
- Passionate about technology and loves to share knowledge with other teachers?
- Good at math and helps train other teachers within your district?

If so, you are a teacher leader! These are just a few examples of ways teachers can take on leadership roles. Teacher leaders expand their areas of influence and improve their own skills as well as those of others.

In their book *Awakening the Sleeping Giant*, Marilyn Katzenmeyer and Gayle Moller (1996) explain that when teachers take on leadership roles, students benefit. "The ultimate value of teacher leadership is improved practice and increased student performance," they write.

For principals, teacher leaders can help lighten the load and provide new ideas and a fresh outlook. Teachers and principals often arrive at better solutions to school problems when they collaborate.

"Teachers are often much closer to the issues that come up in a school than principals are," says Parry Graham, principal at Lufkin Road Middle School in Apex, N.C. Therefore, she says, teachers often devise effective resolutions to the problems schools face.

However, even if leaders and teachers themselves see the value of teacher leadership, that alone does not guarantee teachers' success. For teachers to be effective leaders, they need principals to support them; place them in leadership positions that match their skills, talents, and personality traits; and give them opportunities for professional development so that they can increase their efficacy. Also, teachers need principals to provide clear guidelines about what is expected of them as leaders.

Building Positive Relationships

Education experts state that principals are an essential component in ensuring the success of teacher leaders. Moller and Anita Pankake (2006), authors of *Lead with Me: A Principal's Guide to Teacher Leadership*, argue that principals must share power for teachers to really own new

leadership roles. The authors state, "Principals [should] not hold 'leadership rights,' but [should] be responsible for creating opportunities for teachers to lead and learn." Moller and Pankake encourage principals to support teacher leaders by building positive relationships, distributing power and authority, and aligning teacher leadership with teacher learning.

Pankake, a former principal, explains that an important part of building relationships involves principals "getting to know who their teachers are, what they are like, and what their passions are." Knowing teachers' strengths also helps principals avoid matching teachers with tasks or roles they may not be able to handle or have any interest in, she says.

Teacher leader Bill Ferriter agrees. Ferriter, a 6th grade social studies and language arts teacher at Salem Middle School in Apex, N.C., says, "The most effective principals are the ones who know their faculty members and know their passions."

Ferriter's principal recognized his passion for technology and asked him to provide professional development training to other teachers about how to use digital tools in the classroom. Ferriter says that the principal has asked several other teachers to provide professional development instruction to the staff in the areas that interest them.

"The most valuable part of my school principal's plan is that we're all working in our areas of interest," he says. In return, Ferriter says the principal is getting motivated teacher leaders who enjoy what they are doing.

Distributing Power and Authority

"Principals who view their power and authority as tools for expanding leadership are at the forefront in leading today's schools," explain Moller and Pankake. Principals must authentically engage in leadership and welcome diverse perspectives in the best interest of the school, the authors note.

Matthew Wight, principal at Apex High School in Apex, N.C., agrees that listening to the ideas of teacher leaders and letting them make decisions about what is best for the students is important. As an example, Wight says that his school's math department came to him and proposed reversing the sequence of Algebra 2 and Geometry in an effort to raise students' Algebra 2 scores.

"This was contrary to the central office's [directive]," Wight says. "But I gave them the flexibility to do what they thought was right." Wight says that so far the results of reversing the two classes are inconclusive.

"But what I hope the math teachers know is that I'm willing to give up some of that authority and give them the power to make those decisions," he says. "Instead of saying, 'That's not how the county does it,' I said, 'You all have done the research and, if you think it's the best thing to do for the kids, I'm willing to take the heat and I'm willing to go to bat for you.'"

Another important part of distributing authority, Pankake says, involves principals clearly reviewing expected outcomes of assigned tasks and projects with teacher leaders. Pankake says principals should keep close contact with their teacher leaders and ask how things are going and what else they need to be successful in their task. Principals should then do their best to provide teachers with the tools they need to complete the assigned task successfully.

Aligning Teacher Leadership with Teacher Learning

Most teachers require additional training and professional development to become successful teacher leaders. Pankake says that staff development is an important part of teacher leadership.

"Teachers have a lot of professional training and background but not necessarily the kinds of skills required for their leadership position," she explains. For example, if a teacher is placed in charge of a hiring committee, Pankake says, that teacher should ideally have some legal background knowledge so that she can determine which questions she can and cannot ask potential candidates.

Graham agrees: "One big challenge is that many—or most—teachers who take on teacher leadership positions don't have experience with leadership. The skill set for leadership is different than the skill set needed to be an effective leader. As a teacher, you are the king of your classroom; when you are working with adults [as a teacher leader], though, you don't have the authority necessarily—like an administrator. You have to call on another set of relationship and organization skills."

Creating a Positive Climate

Creating an environment that nurtures and supports teacher leaders and leads to their success takes time, Pankake says. She suggests that principals take small steps, such as starting by encouraging a core group of people to assume leadership roles. Over time, this core group of leaders may influence other teachers within the school to take on leadership roles.

Even though it may take time, principals will ultimately be glad they created a school culture that encourages and supports teacher leaders. "Whenever you have people involved in the process of becoming leaders, you end up with a better climate, better decisions, and more support for those decisions," Wight says.

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